



Society of the Cincinnati
IN
The State of Rhode Island and Providence
Plantations

INSTITUTED
BY THE
COMMISSIONED OFFICERS OF THE RHODE ISLAND CONTINENTAL LINE OF THE REVOLUTION, JUNE 24, 1783.

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1913-1914

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AN ARISTOCRACY IN A DEMOCRACY

ADDRESS

BY

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BEFORE

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IN THE

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AN ARISTOCRACY IN A DEMOCRACY

On the Fourth of July, 1776, the Continental Congress adopted a Declaration of Independence which, among other things, declared as self-evident truths "that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness."

We shall go far astray in our effort to understand the origin of our American system of government if we suppose that these familiar phrases were intended only as an empty form, a dignified introduction to a serious act of national self-assertion, a string of good-natured platitudes designed to catch the public ear and secure approval for the substantive part of the Declaration itself. On the contrary, they are nothing less than the foundation on which our government is built. They embody, in striking and cogent phrase, the uppermost political philosophy of modern times. They assert without reservation the equality of all men; they declare that that equality arises from the nature of things, and is in no sense a concession by one man, or by any group of men, to the people as a whole; that government itself may rightfully exist only in the form which the people choose to have for the time

being; and that when the wish of the people changes, the form of government may rightfully change also.

Here, at least, is no admission that government exists by Divine right, or takes this form or that on *a priori* grounds. The Declaration of Independence is a broad and unequivocal assertion of the unrestrained right of the people to do as they please, to make changes when and as they please, so long as life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are not impaired; and whether or not they are impaired is, again, for the same uncontrolled people to decide. From the standpoint of the Congress of 1776, whatever is right, provided only that the people have done it. As individuals or classes we are nothing; as parts of the mass only are we anything, and the mass must have its way.

Go forward now a few years. On the tenth of May, 1783, the American and French officers at the cantonments of the American Army on the Hudson formed the Society of the Cincinnati. The declaration then adopted set forth that "to perpetuate as well the remembrance of this vast event [the achievement of independence] as the mutual friendships which have been formed under the pressure of common danger, and, in many instances, cemented by the blood of the parties, the officers of the American Army do hereby, in the most solemn manner, associate, constitute, and combine themselves into one society of Friends, to endure as long as they shall endure, or any of their eldest male posterity, and in failure thereof the collateral branches who may be judged worthy of becoming its supporters and members." Upon the roll of original members, we are told, "appeared the names of all the great historic military and naval characters of the Revolution, and upon the roll of honorary members,

elected for their own lives only, appeared many of the signers of the Declaration of Independence."

The situation is interesting. Less than eight years after the Declaration, before the definite treaty of peace with Great Britain had been signed or the army disbanded, the officers of the American Army unite to form a patriotic society on an hereditary principle. To them and their descendants, preferably in the male line, were to belong the honors of the Cincinnati. None of them, we may be sure, was ignorant of the principles for which he had fought; none of them, perhaps, would have cared publicly to deny or question those principles. Yet an hereditary society, founded upon a necessarily small and limited membership, may well at first sight seem to us, as it seemed to many at the time, a curious institution in a country dedicated to a belief in the universal equality of men. It seemed like the stuff of which, in the countries of the old world, aristocracies were made; and visions of class privileges and exemptions, decorations, honors, titles, courts, and thrones rose before the public mind and brought suspicion, criticism and hostility. Was it because there was no place for an aristocracy in a democracy, or because democracy itself, not to speak of aristocracy, was so little understood, or because the doctrine of the Declaration of Independence was already breaking down?

Look forward once more to 1787, when the Federal Convention met at Philadelphia to frame the Constitution of the United States. Washington, first president of the Society of the Cincinnati, presided. Before him sat men to whom every step of the revolutionary struggle was a vivid personal memory; men who had signed the Declaration of Independence, framed the Articles of Confederation and the constitutions of their States, served as gov-

ernors, judges, or members of assembly, and fought Great Britain in Congress and in the field. They were met to form a constitution which should receive the "consent of the governed," and insure to themselves and their posterity those blessings of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for which, according to the Declaration of Independence, governments exist among men.

Did you ever reflect upon the characteristics of the Constitution framed by that Convention, and compare them with the fundamental principles of the Declaration of Independence? At only one point did the government of the United States rest upon direct popular action or control, and that is in the provision for the election of members of the House of Representatives. Here and nowhere else, and here only once in two years, were the people allowed to voice their will directly. The members of the Senate were to be elected, not by the people, but by the State Legislatures, and were to hold their places for six years. Only after four years, when two-thirds of the members might by rotation have retired, could the party complexion of the body be reversed. The President is not elected by the people, but by a clumsy device of secondary election which was antiquated before Washington died, and which is a hopeless anomaly to-day. A number of our Presidents, including the present Chief Magistrate, have held their offices with only a minority of the popular vote back of them. The judges of the Federal Courts are appointed by the President, and hold office for life. When it comes to amendments, the lack of direct popular control is equally apparent. No popular vote is taken on amendments, as we know, but secondary action through the State Legislatures is provided for, with, in addition, the requirement of a three-fourths majority to insure ratifica-

tion. Lastly, in none of the States was the Constitution submitted to popular vote, while in a significantly large number of States the ratifying conventions were not representative of the people as a whole.

The truth is, of course, that there is little that is "popular" about our national form of government. One can almost see embodied before him, in the careful provisions for appointment, secondary election and life tenure, the fear of direct and unfettered expression of the popular will. Equality and freedom, intact and secure in theory, are in practice hedged about with hard and fast restrictions. What I wish to emphasize, however, is not that this is so, but that it was intended to be so. It was the intention to contrive a system which would check and limit popular action, and remove the government and its servants from too direct responsibility to the voters. It was intended that changes in public opinion should be registered but slowly in the form or personnel of the Federal government. The fathers might well have written into the Constitution of the United States the purpose which John Locke stated with brutal frankness in his "Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina"—"that we may avoid erecting a numerous democracy." What the fathers desired was government by the best men, for government by the people, in the sense of the Declaration of Independence, they neither had nor liked.

I have recalled to you these facts of our national history in order to discuss with you briefly the function of an aristocracy in a twentieth century democracy. You will not, I am sure, think me presumptuous in saying that the subject seems to me peculiarly appropriate for a celebration such as you hold today, because you yourselves are, in a certain sense, an aristocracy. You belong to a

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Society of which those only whose ancestors were of a particular social class may become members. I should feel very much ashamed of you if I did not think that you were all proud of your membership, and alive to the importance and dignity and honor of connection with something that is exclusive. It is at your own risk that you have invited one who is not of your number to speak to you today and tell you what he thinks of you. Aristocratic, too, in the same sense, are the numberless societies of sons and daughters, descendants and dames, pioneers and pilgrims, cavaliers and favorite sons, which have multiplied so prodigiously in recent years, and done for history an indispensable service. With all of them there is some obvious element of ancestry, or service, or association which signalizes the group, sets it apart from others, awakens pride or patriotism at memory of it, erects a barrier which none but the few may pass. Any society of men or women to which only a few can by any possibility belong, from which the many, however worthy in other respects, must for some particular reason be forever excluded, is an aristocracy. I am here to ask with you the question whether such little aristocracies have any proper function to perform in American society, or whether they are anachronisms, useless or perhaps harmful growths on the body politic and social.

The question seems to me to have the more appropriate-ness because of the character of much present-day political discussion. Ours is peculiarly a moment of appeal to the people. That we have not, on the whole, been governed very well is pretty generally admitted. The explanation that I see offered most commonly is that the people do not control their government; that self-constituted leaders get control of the machinery of government and work it for

their own advantage, and that the machinery itself is so contrived as to lend itself naturally to such misuse. Restore government to the people, to whom it belongs, give the popular will a full chance to designate officials and make laws, and the equality and freedom which are our birthright will once more become realities.

Underlying this plea for political reform is the assumption that the people, if left to themselves, will do right; that the judgment of the many is better and surer than the judgment of the few, and that the greatest good of the greatest number will be achieved as soon as we give everybody a voice as to how it shall be brought about. I scan the literature of contemporary political discussion in vain to discover that either the good motive, the wisdom, or the power of the people is, or ought to be, subject to really important limitation. Unless I misinterpret seriously the spirit of things, the demand of the hour is for the utmost measure of direct popular participation in the work of government, whether in the making of laws, or in their execution, or in the adjudication by the courts of controversies under them; and this demand is made, not in the spirit of revolution, or with a reckless willingness to try new experiments, but in a sincere belief that only in this way will the best interests of the people and of government be served.

An occasion like this is no place for a political speech, and I would like to allay at once the fears of any who may think that I am at the point of making one. It is not my intention to announce any program, or to weigh the merits or defects of any current proposals of change or reform. Precept and admonition of that sort are abundant, and there is no need of continuing the preaching. I am concerned here with a question which to me seems

much more fundamental, and consequently much more serious.

I cannot but think that there is a truly extraordinary amount of unclear thinking in this strenuous and reiterated demand for complete popular initiative and control. Doubtless the people must be allowed to manage their own affairs if they want to, for the very good reason that they have the power to do so if they choose. The ultimate sanction for law is physical force, and the majority of physical force, whenever it exerts itself, will always prevail. From this point of view, a ballot may be regarded as representing a physical force back of it, and a majority of ballots, with whatever wisdom or stupidity they may be cast, will of course decide an election. Moreover, it is generally idle to quarrel with the popular choice. The oft-quoted saying of Burke, that he did not know how to frame an indictment against a whole people, probes the depths of political ethics. The ethical principles of conduct which constrain the individual fail utterly when applied to the mass. To find a standard by which to try the actions of people in the aggregate is as difficult as to find a fulcrum for the lever with which to lift the globe. We can never say that the people are right, or that they are wrong, until time has applied to them the test of survival. If what they do survives and brings, humanly considered, prosperity and well-being, we are bound to admit that it is right; if it does not survive it is wrong. The voice of history is the voice of God.

If this were the whole story, the logical thing for us to do would be to throw up our hands at once and surrender. But it is not the whole story. Politics is essentially a practical matter. It is, indeed, concerned with the ultimate welfare of the nation, but its main concern

must always be with that which is present and immediate, with the problems and difficulties here and now. And at this point, I venture to think, we reach the parting of the ways. Firmly as I believe that the deliberate action of the people will in the long run be right, I am entirely unable to convince myself that in the short run, upon any given issue within the scope of practical politics, the unrestrained voice of the multitude is at all certain to declare for wisdom, or righteousness, or practical efficiency. Educated, organized, directed, led by the best intelligence and the purest motive, the voice of the people is, in very truth, the voice of God; left to itself it is far more likely to be only the hoarse, raucous voice of the ignorant and unthinking mob. The world owes much to liberty, but we do not forget that crimes have been committed in that name.

Here, then, we find the sphere of an aristocracy in a democracy. Upon the aristocracy devolves, in any popular government, the indispensable function of leadership, the maintenance of high ideals, the organization of wisdom, experience and farseeing ambition for the public welfare. I have not in mind a vulgar aristocracy of mere wealth, although even that has its uses; or of mere social prominence, although that may minister to social happiness; or of mere hereditary descent, although it is a priceless possession to have been well born; or of mere public service, although politics is accounted the highest occupation of a gentleman. The aristocracy which pictures itself before me is, rather, one of sound physique, disciplined intelligence, trained efficiency, public spirit, cosmopolitan tastes, a feeling for history and tradition, and unpretentious good manners. It is an aristocracy of the best men.

Let us scrutinize for a moment the terms of that definition. First, sound physique. After generations of animal-

ism, sustained by a false theory of morality and a pernicious notion of religious obligation, the modern world is at last awakening to the menace of the unfit. It is trying to secure, in the production of human beings, something of the intelligence which has come to be exercised widely in the propagation of horses and cattle. Slowly but steadily we are developing an aristocracy of the well and properly born, every member of which will take pride in his father and mother, and will cultivate the same pride in his children. The world lost much when it dispensed with ancestor worship, and I welcome the new and modern revival of it. I honor the men and women who keep alive the memory of their ancestors, and who seek, in pains-taking and self-sacrifice, to keep their family line pure and strong.

Second, disciplined intelligence and trained efficiency. In an age of enormous wealth we still give to education only the dog's share of attention, shelter and food. Four dollars and ~~sixty~~-four cents represents the average annual expenditure per capita in this country for education, and we pay our teachers on the average two dollars a day. Our industries and our politics are calling loudly for men of sound learning, disciplined minds, trained ability and sure grasp. I cannot agree with those who would eliminate the expert from government. It seems to me that we need the expert very much, and that the business of the people's welfare is too important to be trusted to amateurs. Would not the business interests of this country breathe a sigh of relief if it were known that a statesman of the calibre of Alexander Hamilton, your second President-General, was to direct the work of currency reform? And would we not gratefully doff our hats to him as an aristocrat of intellectual power?

Third, public spirit. A kindly critic has told us that, with all our political virtues, the United States is the only country in the world in which politics is not regarded as the proper occupation of a gentleman. Such was not the case when your Society was founded, nor for many years thereafter. Until the Civil War, throughout the country, men of family, wealth and culture figured large in the public service of the States and the nation, and were looked upon by all as the natural holders of public office, the natural spokesmen of the people. After a generation of boss and machine rule, there are now signs of a return to this older order of things. Young men of family, education, wealth and position, true aristocrats of the American democracy, are more and more entering political life and serving the cause of good government. May their tribe increase until none shall be found too rich, too influential, too well-born, too enmeshed in social obligation or convention, to serve the common weal!

Again, in the items of our definition, the element of cosmopolitan taste. Some one will suspect at once that I am going to characterize American society as provincial, and so I am. For proof, look at our newspapers. In this country of nearly a hundred million people, you may count on your fingers the metropolitan journals from which you may glean more than a few scanty indications of what is being said, thought or done in the world. We have not a half-dozen magazines in which a serious literary, historical or philosophical essay could find a place. The reason is perfectly simple,—we do not as a people care about what is being said or thought or done in the world, and we have not the patience to wade through a serious essay; and so the editor, with the fear of the counting-room before his eyes, gives his readers the local,

provincial news, the ephemeral article that they want. But your aristocrat is not of that sort. To him, the proper study of mankind is man. He would orient himself, not in the culture of Harvard or Yale, or the society of Boston or New York, but in the thought and life of the world. We are talking today of world power, and we are attaining it; of world business, and we are growing toward it; of world peace, and we are discerning it afar off; let us rise also to the conception of world culture, and break forever the shackles of a little Americanism.

Once more, a feeling for history and tradition. I know of nothing which, in the practical affairs of life, so fortifies the mental judgment and clarifies the moral vision as the consciousness that the present is rooted in the past, that we are what we are because of what we have been. It is the dead, not the living, that count the most in life. The theology of the Roman Church evolved for the believer the idea of a treasury of good works, in which the good deeds and pious aspirations of all the faithful, indefinitely greater in volume than was demanded for their own salvation, might be availed of for righteousness by the generations who should come after. Some such treasury is yours. In the lives of the men who, in the long succession of a hundred and thirty years, have served as general officers of your Society,—Washington, Hamilton, the Pinckneys, Horace Binney, Hamilton Fish,—what a wealth of ability and motive and achievement for the great tasks of the present! What a chastening restraint on haste, frivolity, or discouragement! What a treasury of power and steadfastness for you who may call them brethren!

And, lastly, unpretentious good manners. Do we fall easily into the careless and incorrect speech, the slouch-

ing gait, the cheap and gaudy attire, the loud assertion of our rights or pretensions, the irreverence in holy places, the flippant criticism of men in public life, or the contempt for law which enshrouds us like a miasma on every hand? Then truly are we of the earth, earthy; but also, it must be confessed, rather typically American also. I am no advocate of militarism, but I would be willing to have the American youth of today put through a few years of military discipline, in order that he might learn to stand erect on both feet, to walk without shambling, to keep his person and his clothes clean, and to yield instinctive respect to recognized authority. Very minor virtues these are in themselves, it is true, but everywhere and always they mark the man who accepts, in sincerity and humility, the heavy responsibilities of honorable birth and intellectual leadership.

I congratulate you, therefore, members of the Society of the Cincinnati, upon your place in the roll of American aristocracy. I congratulate you that, because much has been given to you, much is required of you. In the long list of American patriotic societies your Society admittedly takes the lead. Dwell as you may upon the greatness of your honorable past, there is happily no danger that you will become a group apart, or that pride of birth will overshadow pride of citizenship. To this only would I summon you: that you accept the burden of leadership that is laid upon you. To you belong of right the clearer vision, the wider knowledge, the deeper experience. See to it that if the people, the vast, restless, seething, struggling mass of people, perchance go wrong, it be through no fault of yours. See to it that, as far as in you lies,

“That which may come, that which must come,
“Shall come well.”

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